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PRACTICAL RELIGION,

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A

LETTER

TO. A

LADY.



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PRACTICAL RELIGION, &c.

MADAM,

SINCE God has been pleas'd to incline your heart to an early and serious enquiry after Religion, so that you are sincerely desirous to know the will of God in order to do it. I heartily wish you had laid your Commands upon one more able to assist you, than I am : who being bred up in an Age of Speculation and Controversy, have addicted myself to the study of Divinity more perhaps than the practice of Religion ; and have been (I pray God forgive me) more desirous to furnish my head with Notions, than my heart with

with good inclinations. I thought myself, by my Profession, chiefly engaged in a study how to defend the Church by Law established, against all Dissenters, rather than to promote the common cause of serious Piety; and whilst by the strange unaccountable genius of this Age, I have been led aside to mix the study of Politicks with that of Religion, I have been busily assisting the Office of a Minister of State, rather than doing the good work of a Minister of Jesus Christ.

Now although it has pleased God to make me in some measure sensible of those by-paths, in which I have sometimes walked, to the hindrance of that Duty to which I ought entirely to have devoted myself; yet I am apt
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to fear lest those Prejudices and undue Prepossessions of Mind may still remain within me, by which I shall be prevented from giving your Ladyship such an Idea of Religion, as is short, plain, and pure, free from superstitious Appendages, and separate from every by-interest.

But without doubt such as this is the true Spirit of the Christian Religion, every line whereof directly tends to make us easy within ourselves, kind and comfortable to one another here, and happy with God hereafter.

That our holy Religion is a wise institution, will be evident to any one who considers that God is its Author, whose wisdom appears in all his works:

Thus the frame of visible nature being agreeably set together, & having each part of it suited to useful and proper ends, demonstrates itself to be the work of Divine Wisdom: in like manner the whole Plan of pure Religion, having its parts suitable to each other, and every one of them agreeably set to the same good and great design of the whole, does thereby prove itself to be the contrivance of an all-wise God.

And hereby the Wisdom of the Christian Religion will particularly appear because every part of it tends to promote the universal good of mankind; for which reason the Divine Founder thereof was named Jesus, (that is) Saviour, because his only design

sign was to save us from the prevailing power of Sin, and from those Miseries in which that evil power would involve us.

Thus Temperance promotes our Health, Justice in our dealings prevents us from sustaining the revenges of the injured, and gains us trust among Men, with all the Benefits which arise from thence. Charity by promoting the common good of others draws back their love and affection, to ourselves, while Patience preserves quiet within our own breasts, and self-denial by restraining our extravagant Appetites, establishes the just power of Reason over us ; thereby fitting us for all conditions of life ; and thus the law of Christ answers to the

Character

Character of Wisdom, by its conducing to the best design of God in the chiefest good of Man : and upon this account Solomon character'd the idea of Religion under the name of Wisdom.

Beside these moral duties, there are several threats of God's Judgements and Promises of his favour contained in Christ's Institution ; the former were wisely designed to restrain us from Immoralities, which are our greatest Follies ; and the latter to engage us in the practice of Virtue ; which is our greatest Wisdom : the threatenings prepare the way for the Promises, and qualify us to receive them ; in as much as they shake off our affections from ill objects in order for the Promises to fix them upon
good

good ones. We must needs cease to do evil, before we can learn to do well.

Now although a due consideration of the divine nature will carry us on to the belief of a future state, in which he who is in perfection the best of all Beings, will distinguish the good from the bad by ample rewards and just punishments: yet because every ones capacity may not be sufficient to make this wise reflection, therefore Jesus Christ was pleased (as the Gospel phrases it) to bring Life and Immortality to light: i. e. to give the World full assurance of a future state, in which the just God will distinguish Men hereafter in such a manner as they shall distinguish themselves here; and it is the wisdom of every one to preserve
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this belief in his heart, and bear it always about him, because it is the most awful Monitor against our committing folly, and yields the strongest encouragement to Virtue.

From what has been said, your Ladyship sees, first, what is meant by saving a Soul, viz. to deliver it from vicious habits, & fearful punishments, the fatal consequents of such habits; and by establishing Virtue therein, to recommend it to the favour of God. And secondly,—that the Gospel of Christ was designed to this very end; and its tendency thereunto is its Wisdom. And thirdly, from hence you also perceive in what respect Faith in Jesus Christ is said to save us, viz. because this Faith is our receiving the
Christian

Christian Moral for the Rule of our lives, and the threats and Promises contained in the Gospel, for the outward motives of our practice according to that Rule.

And from these three considerations summed up together you may examine all the various pretences which differing Churches and Communions make to the purity of Christian Faith, so as to form a right judgement of them; for that communion which manifests itself to have no other design than to assist its Members in saving their Souls from the power of Sin by the moral and Motives aforementioned, is certainly the purest Church; and that Faith which has no other Tendency, is the purest Faith. So that if you

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form yourself upon this Principle, you may pass by all nice Speculations, or profound Mysteries, which have no direct tendency to improve your Morals, without any hazard of salvation.

Secondly, As the Christian Institution is wisely practical, so it is plain : or in other words, we may say, that as the wisdom of the Christian Religion appears first by its being practical so it appears secondly by being plain.

The obscure answers which were given out from the old Heathen Oracles, are now known to have proceeded from the chicane of a designing Priesthood : who, to maintain their pretence of foretelling what shall come to pass, sent back all those who came to enquire after future events, with
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doubtful and uncertain answers. And it has been the observation of wise Men, that when any one affects to be dark and Mysterious in his Conversation, either he has some indirect design in so doing, or else whilst he makes an ostentation of wisdom he does in reality but discover his folly.

Now the Wisdom of God cannot be conceived to aim at any other design In communicating itself to us, than the Information of our Minds in the nature of good and evil, and this in order to direct our choice ; and all instruction must of necessity be plain ; since it is by things easy and familiar, such as at first sight we may apprehend, whereby we can be led on to the knowledge of matters more remote
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and difficult : but obscure and unintelligible doctrines can have no effect upon us beside unprofitable amusement ; and whatsoever is by the wisdom of God laid out of our reach, can be no part of our concern.

Farther, to what end did he give us intellectual Faculties ? surely not to amuse but to improve us, by enabling us thoroughly to understand each part of our holy Religion, which directly tends to that end, viz. Our moral Improvement : as you will soon perceive, if you reduce the Christian Institution to its general heads, which are these.

First, A Narration of matters of Fact.

Secondly,

Secondly, A Declaration of Moral Laws.

Thirdly, A Revelation of such motives which are proper to enforce this Law upon our minds. And

Fourthly, Serious Exhortations to refresh our Memories with our duty ; and earnestly to recommend it to our practice.

First, Your Ladyship sees, that the matters of fact contained in the four Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, (viz. the Travels and transactions of Christ and his Disciples) are so plainly related, that you understand the Relation as easily as you read it. And Secondly, all Laws must be plain, because they are directions. Now, obscure directions are
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but Delusions. And Laws which are dubious and difficult to be understood, are traps & snares. And thirdly, 'Tis as necessary that Motives should be very intelligible, because their design is to work strongly upon our Wills, by convincing our Understandings. Add to this Fourthly, That mystical and unintelligible Exhortations are ridiculous, upon which account St. Paul forbid Religious Exercises to be performed in an unknown Tongue.

Now as the four Gospels and Acts of the Apostles contain matters of fact, laws, and motives; so the Epistles contain Exhortations to Seriousness and Piety, arising from the laws, facts, and motives, before mentioned: and I take these Books to be sufficiently com-

comprehensive of the Institutions and Ordinances of Jesus Christ: which ought indeed to be easily intelligible, because they concern the poor, weak, and unlettered People as much as the Learned.

Nor can I see that the doctrine of Christ was by him, or his Apostles, delivered first of all into the hands of the learned to be by them conveyed into the minds of the ignorant; but on the contrary, it is manifest that our Saviour directed both his discourses and actions immediately to the common people as well as to the Scribe; and in like manner did his Disciples address their Preachings and Writings, principally to the inferior Class of Mankind.

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From all this Discourse concerning the clearness of Christ's Institution, you may spare yourself the needless trouble of reading abstruse and mysterious points of Divinity. Nor need you suffer yourself to be amused with the pretended deep Speculations of profound Men, when you have the plain directions of a wise, and a good God before you, in following whereof you shall meet with great reward.

Thirdly, The Christian Institution is short. True and genuine Religion has always been summed up, and gathered together into a narrow compass, by those who best understood it.

Thus Micah. (6. 8.) speaking of God saith, He hath shewn thee O Man, what is good, and what doth the Lord
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thy God require of thee ? but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. And our Saviour sums up the whole Law in our Love to God, and our Neighbour. And in another place includes the whole scope of the Law and the Prophets, in this one Rule, Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye unto them ; hereby directing us to make a right use of that Reason which God established as his Oracle in our Breasts : to which we may at all times resort ; and from whence we may be resolved in such cases as concern our duty to one another.

For as by consulting your own reason
you know wherein you are justly

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dealt with, and wherein you receive wrong ; when you are kindly used, and when otherwise : so from the same principle of reason you cannot but know when you deal justly or wrongfully, and when you do kind or ill offices to another ; this one short comprehensive Rule, taking for its Foundation the Equality of Mankind in respect of their common nature, renders Religion itself a matter sensible unto us.

For I can feel the wound of a sharp slanderous Tongue as sensibly as that of a Sword ; I can feel the wrongs done to myself and Family ; and am as much sensible of the benefits I enjoy from the just and kind dealings of those with whom I am concerned ;
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and hereby I am in the shortest and plainest way admonished of my behaviour to others : and if this one short Rule were reduced to practice, the state of Paradise would be restored, and we should enjoy a Heaven upon Earth.

For hereby first all Persecutions for Conscience sake, which have occasioned such violent disorders, and vast effusion of blood, would be at an end, because every one who has any Conscience, would most willingly preserve it free from the Impositions of Men in the worship of God. To compel Men by Fire and Faggot to partake even of a delicious Entertainment, is a savage sort of Hospitality.

Secondly,

Secondly, All Factions in any state would be at an end, if every member thereof were contented that every one of his Fellow-Members who was not an Enemy to the Government, might, (having equal pretence of Merit,) enjoy equal Privileges with himself.

Thirdly, The occasions of War and Law-Suits would be taken away. Since nothing but manifest wrong can be the just cause of either.

And Fourthly, There would be no private quarrels, and uneasiness among Neighbours ; Since by this Rule of doing as we would be done unto, all rash Censures, sharp Reflections, and ungrounded suspicions, and jealousies, which are the Seeds of private

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vate Animosities, are taken away. And hereby we may expect a plentiful store of God's blessings among us, who will measure out his kindness to us in the same manner, as we measure out ours to one another.

The reason why Religion should be both a short and plain Institution, will appear if you consider the common circumstances and conditions of Men in this World. For though your Ladyship and many more, have leisure enough to read and digest whole Volumes of useful Knowledge, (if there are any such) yet the greatest part of mankind being necessarily imployed in making daily provisions for themselves and Families, and discharging the common offices of Life, cannot attend

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to any Religious Institution which is either difficult or tedious.

It is certain, That the whole Life of Man is not sufficient for him to read all the Controversies which have been written upon pretence of Religion; but it is as certain, That God never lays on us a greater task than what he affords us both Abilities and Opportunities to perform: wherefore we may conclude, That since the duties of Religion are laid in common upon all, the poor day Labourer must have ability and opportunity sufficient to instruct himself therein, without hindering the constant work of his Calling. And in all this the Wisdom and Goodness of God are made known, by adapting our duties to our Circumstances of Life.

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From hence you may save yourself the trouble of reading the long and tedious Disputes which with such intemperate Zeal are always in agitation among the several parties of Christians. Indeed the true Christian Institution being short, it cannot admit of being spun out into long Controversies : And tho' I have read many Books of Controversial Divinity, I do not remember that I have met with any one Controversy about the matter of meer Religion ; as whether I should maintain in my heart a high reverence and veneration for Almighty God ? Whether I ought to walk before him in Sincerity and Uprightness ? Whether or no I should be thankful to him for all the benefits which I have received from him ?

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Whether I shall submit to his will with Patience and endeavour to govern my Passions, to bring them to a due Moderation and Temper, by making them subject to the Law of Reason ? Whether I should be true to my Promise, just in my Dealings, Charitable to the Poor, and sincere in my Devotions ? Whether I should be temperate and sober, modest and chaste, and demean myself in an humble, civil and agreeable manner towards those with whom I converse ? Whether I should be heartily sorry when I come short of my Duty, and should be watchful in the denial of my irregular Appetites, Passions, and evil Inclinations for the future ? In short it has not (that I know of) been disputed whether Justice, Benignity, Meekness
 Charity,

Charity, Moderation, Patience, and Sobriety, should be received into our affections? or whether we should love God and our Neighbour? Orthodoxy of Faith is made the pretence of Controversy, but the one thing necessary is Orthodoxy of Practice. Soundness in opinion and doctrine, that is, Conformable to the Doctrine established in our Church.

I know your Ladyship will not be pleased with a discourse upon the subject of Religion, unless devotion have its due place in it; nor ought it indeed to be left out, because thankfulness is a necessary part of Religion, and Prayer is the Preservative of the whole. A frequent repetition of our Thanks for all the benefits we enjoy, preserves

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in our Minds the confideration of God as the greateft and beft of Beings ; and thereby Nourifhes Veneration and Gratitude. In like manner Prayer for pardon of Sin, and prefervation of our Persons, is a constant Recognition of the Mercy and bounty of God. But Prayer againft the Power of Sin, is the actual withdrawing of our Inclinations from Evil ; and Prayer for any Grace is an actual application of our Minds, to attain the particular Virtue for which we pray.

Now although I would not advife you againft fet Hours and Forms of Devotion either Private or Publick ; yet I would rather recommend a fort of habitual and occasional Devotion, as very proper to preserve the ftrongeft Im-

Impressions of Religion upon your Mind.

It may be observed that many who are very punctual in keeping to their exact times and forms of Devotion, have fallen short of any visible Improvement in Virtue. The same Pride, Frowardness, Falshood, Covetousness and bitterness of Spirit have appeared in many who have been constant frequenters of the publick as well as closet Forms of Prayer; as if God had not been in all their thoughts. The reason whereof seems to be because their formal Petitions supersede their habitual Endeavours. Men are apt to think, that since they spend in every day such a portion of time in Prayer, they have done all their part: And so
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they leave God Almighty to take care of the event. And this is indeed all we can do when we make our Petitions to our Benefactors upon Earth, viz. offer up our requests to them, either by word or writing, and then only expect their answer.

But it is otherwise with relation to God. Our Petitions to him must not take off from our constant endeavours to perform that work for which we pray his assistance. And this occasional Devotion, which I would recommend, is in its own nature a constant endeavour after Virtue, as well as a serious Petition for it. For it ariseth from a frequent observation of ourselves in our particular occurring circumstances; from which observation suitable desires

desires will almost necessarily flow. As if at any time I find that I have done an ill thing, immediately upon the discovery, I beg God's Pardon, and resolve to make recompence for the ill I have done. Or if I have designed any evil in my heart, and presently beg Pardon of him who knoweth the secrets thereof; in so doing I have given check to its progress. In like manner, if I have spoken slanderously, rashly, or injuriously concerning any one; and upon Recollection thereof I ask forgiveness of God, and desire that I may not do the like for the future: but on the contrary, that I may govern my Tongue better; in all this I am labouring to withdraw my Soul from evil, and to form myself upon a principle of Virtue.

Every Night and Morning are proper times of leisure to call to Mind the preservation, support, and advantages we have received the Day or Night preceding. And this Recollection being accompany'd with thankfulness to our great Preserver, is the actual continuance and carrying on of our gratitude to God. If I perceive Pride or Passion to arise in my heart, so that I am apt to put a greater value upon every thing I do, and despise others : or if I find myself eagerly concerned for any little Worldly advantage, or any small punctilio of honour ; and hereupon I beg of God for an humble Spirit, and a Heavenly Mind ; I am herein endeavouring to expel the Poison of Sin by its proper Antidote.

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We cannot but feel the Disorders of our Minds, as much as the Diseases of our Bodies. And the causes of a disordered Mind are much more easily discerned, than the causes of a Bodily Distemper. For either my Mind is troubled for want or losses, or it may be for the prosperity of others, or want of a revenge, or because I cannot have my will in what I designed. Upon these or such like occasions, the proper Cure is Devotional in begging God's Pardon for my discontent: and being desirous that my will should be submitted to his who has taught me that I should not return evil for evil. but that I should love my Neighbour as myself. This sort of Soliloquy, and occasional mental address to God, is a sure way to compose the disorders
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of our thoughts. For the growing power of any Sin is most certainly suppressed by introducing the opposite Virtue into our desires.

The same method may be used as to Sins of Omission. A serious Person will observe neglects of common duties, which respect either God or Man. He cannot but take Notice how much he has neglected his business, or his health ; how little he has considered God as his Owner, Governor and Benefactor : and how small a portion of what God has blessed him with he has laid out upon the good of his Fellow-Creatures. And if hereupon a Man is seriously desirous to become more dutiful to God, more useful to himself, and beneficial to others,

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he is then actually bending his Mind to supply his former Omissions.

This casual Devotion arising from the observation of ourselves, under the common circumstances of Life, (although it can have no set times and forms prescribed to it) will be very effectual to produce, preserve, and increase a true sense of Religion within us. And if you are pleased to apply your thoughts hereunto, as occasion shall direct you, this Devotion will soon become habitual, customary and easy. And its returns, which will be frequent and short, will be a continual restraint from evil-doing, and an actual exercise of Virtue.

This exercise which I have been

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prescribing is commonly reserved to be performed all at once, in an actual preparation before receiving the Sacrament of the LORD'S SUPPER; which is usually performed by help of an artificial Catalogue of Sins methodically collected out of the Ten Commandments, according to which Catalogue set Forms of Confessions are drawn up, which the Person preparing to receive the Sacrament is to imagine applicable to his particular case, and without any sort of judgement or discretion of his own, he confesses himself guilty of all the Sins therein mentioned together, with all their Aggravations, though, it may be, many of them were of such a heinous nature, as never entered into his heart to commit. And if these Catalogues and Confessional Forms

Forms are read over once a quarter of a Year, or, it may be, once a Month against the usual Sacrament-Day, the work of Preparation is thought to be well passed over.

Yet I cannot but think it better to keep a constant customary watch over ourselves, and upon the first discovery of any evil design or action, immediately to retract it within our hearts, as in the presence of God, and by mental Prayer proper to the occasion, arm ourselves against committing the like for the future. Hereby you discharge a duty in its proper season, which is better than to delay it to a prefixed distance of time : for what is most fresh in memory will make the most lively impression upon us ; but may in a
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little time be forgotten. Besides, we are apt to turn forms into formalities: And a natural discharge of Religious Duties must be more improving than an artificial one.

And by this your Ladyship sees the reason why I have written a Discourse of Religion in general, in Answer to your Letter, wherein you wrote only concerning the LORD'S SUPPER, viz. because I esteem a serious well-inclined temper of Mind to be the best preparation, either for that, or any other of the Ordinances of Jesus Christ, that we may partake of them with advantage and delight.

David advises us to delight ourselves
 in the Lord, that is, in all his ways
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and Ordinances. And I cannot see why our preparation for the Lord's Table, and participation at it, should be accompanied with greater Anxieties of Mind than our communicating in any other holy Office; such as publick Prayer or Preaching. We expect the same Blessing of God in the improvement of our Virtues from all of these Ordinances alike. And why with terror upon our minds we should use any of those means which God has ordained for our good, I do not understand. A Man indeed ought to perform every religious office seriously and soberly; but Fear by amusing and distracting the Mind, is apt to render the Ordinance unprofitable.

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Men ought likewise to be discouraged from coming to Prayer, Preaching or Communicating at the Lord's Table, with a careless, or prophane temper of Mind : Because such unpreparedness does harden Mens hearts, and renders the Ordinance unprofitable. Such as this was the case of the Corinthians, who in celebrating the Lord's Supper where so inconsiderate of what they came to do, that some of them were drunk at the Lord's Table, as you read 1 Cor. 11. 21. and to this their Prophane Behaviour, those Texts of Scripture do particularly relate, which affright some Men from, and others in receiving the Sacrament : on this account it was said, by St. Paul, that they were guilty of the body and blood of Christ : and to
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eat and drink damnation to themselves, not discerning the Lord's body, Ver. 27, 29, that is, by such a prophane and unworthy communicating, they call down God's Judgements upon themselves : for so the word Damnation ought to be understood, because it refers to the Judgements specified in the following Verse, where it is said, that, For this cause, (viz. of drunken Communicating) many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep, that is, die, Ver. 30. Now to avoid these Judgements he exhorts them to examine themselves, that is, to consider within themselves what was the meaning of that duty which they were to perform at the Lord's Table, which Duty was this, viz. to call to mind the Death of Jesus Christ. And this

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Commemoration is by St. Paul stiled,
The discerning the Lord's Body.

The visible sign of our Saviour's Death, which we discern on the Lord's Table, do prepare our minds to contemplate a divine Person, who for his great Charity to the stupid World, suffered the highest injustice, with such an invincible patience, and heroick Fortitude, as was superior to the sharpest malice of his enemies. Thereby setting before us the brightest example of an unshaken resolution to do good in spite of all Discouragements.

+ You will perceive, Madam, by this Discourse, that the Christian Religion is a wise, a plain, and a short institution; the Belief whereof was designed
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to save our Souls from the Power and danger of Sin, by ingrafting virtuous habits in our Minds. You will likewise perceive, that I hold it necessary to keep a constant watch over ourselves, to repent as often as we perceive ourselves to transgress, and by occasional mental Devotion, incline our hearts to observe the Law of Christ, and all this in order to build up a habit of Virtue within us. You will also perceive, that the Contemplation of the death of Christ, with all its circumstances, tends to the same admirable end.

And if these or any other means shall work upon you to be generously just, to bear a good will to all Men, to do what good you can, and to be

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unconcerned for the event of things which are not within your power ; you will be easy within yourself, and satisfied in your own Conscience, which is the Dawn of Heaven upon Earth, and you may cheerfully communicate at any time.

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